

Article

Narratives of War: Decoding Trauma and Silence in Jean Arasanayagam's 'In the Garden Secretly'

Monika Maal

Assistant Professor, Government College, Nadoti, Karauli, Rajasthan, India;
maalmonika2012@gmail.com

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Abstract: Narratives play a vital role in the representation and exploration of the psychological trauma one receives from war. In the context of the Sri Lankan civil war, Jean Arasanayagam's writings act as a space where the writer presents the psychological impact of war on her and the public involved. Ethnic violence has been a recurrent theme in Arasanayagam's writings; one such text is the short story collection *In the Garden Secretly and Other Short Stories*. This paper seeks to analyze the title story by focusing on the narrative of war trauma. The paper will focus on the elements the writer employs to showcase war trauma. The paper aims to address the following question: What is the impact of war on both the attackers and the attacked? How does the writer use symbolism to express the physical and mental destruction caused by war? What role do beliefs play in times of war and unrest? Arasanayagam's narratives are testaments to the trauma of war, which spares no one; such narratives provide a space for reflection as well as healing.

Keywords: trauma; civil war; memory; psychology; narratives

Introduction

The island nation of Sri Lanka had an active civil war from 1983 to 2009. The civil war was fought between the Sinhalese majority government and the militant group LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). Both sides were fighting for the liberation of their country, the government for riddance from militancy, and the LTTE for an independent state for the Tamil minority. The history of the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities dates back to the colonial era. The British imperial government gave more importance to the Tamils for business purposes, allowing them to dominate the other communities. However, the situation reversed after independence as the Sinhalese gained power and formed their government. This

Sinhalese majority government passed a bill in 1956, the 'Sinhala Only Act', which gave an advantage to Sinhalese people in positions of power as well as education, and the Tamils lost access to public employment or government service. This act further aggravated the hostility between the two communities, which resulted in a demand for a separate state, the 'Tamil Elam', by the Tamils. The LTTE group emerged as the sole voice of Tamils demanding the secession of Sri Lanka based on geographical domination of the country by the Tamils and Sinhalese, North and East Sri Lanka for the Tamils, and West and South Sri Lanka for the Sinhalese. July 1983, also known as Black July, in which targeted attacks on Tamils were harboured officially, marks the beginning of the Civil War, which ended in 2009 when the Sinhalese government killed an important LTTE leader. (Anandakugan)

One of the prominent Sri Lankan writers, Jean Arasanayagam, who won the Gratian Prize in 2017 for her poetry collection *The Life of the Poet*, writes about the Sri Lankan civil war in her writings. Arasanayagam's works revolve around the themes of ethnic violence, identity and belonging, the psychological impact of war, and the power of language and poetry. Jean, a Burgher by birth, married a Tamil playwright, which gave her exposure to the experiences of ethnic minorities as well as the trauma of being hated by the other community and the search for identity. Her collection of short stories titled *In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories* primarily focuses on the Sri Lankan civil war. The stories delicately explore the legacies of war.

This paper explores the representation of war trauma in Jean Arasanayagam's short story 'In the Garden Secretly,' focusing on the use of symbolism, fragmentation, silence, and stream of consciousness to convey the psychological impact of war. Written from the perspective of an unnamed Sri Lankan (Sinhalese) bomber pilot in Northern Sri Lanka, the story explores the aftermath of a war and its impact on the psyche of a soldier. The story prompts the reader to question war, as the narrator does on multiple occasions throughout the narrative. The story begins with an exploration of the landscape after the war, which in turn leads to the narrator's self-exploration. The walk among the ruins of war, abandoned houses, eerie silence, and full-grown gardens all lead the narrator to question his purpose in life and war in general.

The introduction of the story starts with a description of the landscape. 'The Garden' in the title can be interpreted as referring to North Sri Lanka, where South Sri Lankans are secretly invading to fight the militants. However, in the process of fighting the militants, this Edenic garden, initially a symbol of tranquillity as well as peace, turns into a site of destruction and violence. The war has changed the landscape; what remains of the green is just the army camouflage-patterned uniform and vehicles. There is an "eerie silence" which pervades the landscape. What remains of the villages is just empty, bombed-out houses. (Arasanayagam, 3) The armoured tanks have destroyed the fences, destroying sites of human existence. There are overgrown gardens with beautiful flowers and ripened fruits, but not a soul in sight. This 'Garden' becomes the microcosm of Sri Lanka as it reflects the country's broader societal and political turmoil. All around is destruction, wherein the victors celebrate their victory, neglecting those lost in the process. In this garden, soldiers are like "strange insects created out of this

landscape of red earth, white sand, and green-black leaves" (5). Nature often reflects societal and political crises. M.H. Abrams also discusses this idea in his work, "The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition."

The 'Garden' also acts as a space for memory. This is where the narrator can confront and process traumatic memories. This ironic walk in the garden makes the narrator think about how, everywhere, innocent, uninvolved people get caught in the crossfire, how even the narrator has bombed civilian bunkers because it was not easy to tell apart from the height where he attacks. Samanth Subramaniam's book, *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War*, talks about how the government killed thousands of civilians, not differentiating between Tamils and Tigers. The war took a toll not only on the people but also on the environment. "The land looked as if it had been crumpled by some giant hand: the vegetation flattened, the earth clawed out, the water turbid." (Subramaniam, 29) It forces the narrator to question his actions in the war. It brings traumatic memories from the past, the impact of the painting 'Guernica', "I remember the village in ruins, bombed buildings, the eyes of terror, the once-human truncated torsos, snorting horses and bulls." (8) The scenario in the painting is similar to what is happening in the civil war. The moment in which the narrator recalls the painting showcases how the past haunts the present. This haunting past shapes the narrator's understanding of the war and its aftermath.

Memory often suppresses the traumatic side of an event. "Memory, like quicklime, destroys the thought of that agony." (9) Cathy Caruth, in her work, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, talks about Freud's concept of latency and repression. A traumatic event is often forgotten, and the original agony, which becomes invisible, manifests in other forms that are often incomprehensible. (Caruth, 8) Memory becomes distorted and fragmented by trauma, which in turn leads to a sense of unreality and disorientation.

Silence and memory have a significant impact in portraying the suppression of trauma and how the past haunts the present in times of war. The imagery of the 'eerie silence' reflects how the trauma that the people and the landscape have gone through is suppressed. The solitary walk of the narrator through the ravaged and silent landscape takes him back to the past. The buildings and the blue-walled church evoke memories of the place's history and how it is connected to him and his family. His missions remind him of the words of his friend. The narrator's focus on the silent and destroyed landscape, rather than the humans, shows how silence acts as a means of suppressing traumatic memories. This silent landscape also allows the narrator his "only moment of solitude and freedom from the all-pervasive rules and regulations which bind him" (15)

War takes a heavy toll on the minds of those involved. It has a substantial psychological impact on the perpetrators as well as on the victims. Arasanayagam's story reflects on the mind of the attackers. The guilt and shame that the narrator feels are part and parcel of the psychological trauma inflicted by the war. It makes the attacker question his existence as well as their role in the war. A sense of pity was felt for the people who had to flee from their homes. The exodus is called into question,

whether it is voluntary or forced. The present situation of the displaced is imagined and empathized with. This displacement causes generational trauma, thereby perpetuating a cycle of violence.

The soldiers also go through this trauma; they do not have the liberty to listen to their hearts and minds. They “have to obey, obey, obey constantly.” (15) Soldiers often take the wars home. “They are still at war when they come home, these soldiers are. In their minds, they are.” (Jolicoeur) Soldiers are in exile as well, similar to the displaced masses. They have also been forced to leave their homes. Their situation changes according to the political scenario. The army currently looked upon as heroes were once “looked upon with terror and hatred.” (14) While fighting the outside war, the soldiers go through inside wars, battling their darkness, concealment, and duplicity. As Jonathan Shay, in his book *Achilles in Vietnam*, talks about the experience of war veterans, it can be observed how the death of comrades haunts them long after they are back from war. One such instance narrated by a veteran goes like

“I think I do not have long to live because I have these dreams of guys in my unit standing at the end of the sofa and blood coming down off them and up the sofa. I wake up screaming and the sofa soaked with sweat. It seems like if the blood reaches me I’m going to die when it does.” (Shay, 24)

The narrator tries to empathize with the general masses who have been displaced by the war, and who had to leave their generational homes and flee for safety. “We think we are here to liberate the people here, though it is never specified from whom. If they thought the same, why would they have fled?” (11) The narrator questions war and the perspectives it holds for each side. For one, the attackers are liberators, but for the other side, they are the enemy. The language of war itself is questioned. “A ‘terrorist’ is ‘killed’. A ‘soldier’ ‘sacrifices his life’.” (7) The attacker is a hero and patriot to some, but to others, the opposite. “War mangles words just as efficiently as it mangles bodies.” (Subramaniam, 84)

War can dehumanize individuals. The soldiers lose empathy and compassion, thereby eroding their humanity. Innocent people get caught up in crossfires. After a victory, the victors often forget about those who were lost in the process. People only want to be a part of history, neglecting the deeds done in the process. The cost of human lives becomes negligible when the result is fame. “...I want to perform deeds which will sound like epics or the tales of war heroes I have idolized.” (8) Death becomes an obsession for the ones involved. The army wants to kill the militants, and vice versa; meanwhile, the innocent people get caught nonetheless. In the name of patriotism and fighting for the motherland, thousands are killed, uprooted, and displaced. Masses alone cannot fight wars. The leader plays a vital role in directing and controlling the masses. He is worshipped like a deity. “So many thousands have been willing to die for the Leader, for the Cause.” (7) Religion and faith are also very significant factors during times of war. Wars are fought based on religion, faith, and political beliefs. War has dual potential; it can erode faith in humanity and a higher power, while also evoking faith in the strongest of non-believers.

When the narrator finds the statue of Christ in an abandoned house, it prompts him to reflect on the state of war, how people who worship the same God are now fighting against each other. The glow of the statue transfixes him, and he feels an intense calm, wherein he forgets all the happenings of the outside war. The calmness the narrator receives from the statue makes him pity the deserters “who had to abandon their house and their shrine” (13). The statue of Christ evokes such profound spirituality in the narrator that he begins to question the logic behind war and animosity. “Don’t they remember Christ who shed His blood for us?... Go in peace...So much blood has already been shed, and there seems to be no sign of an end to the conflict.” (17)

Arasanayagam’s story is a thought-provoking piece on war and its effect on the soldiers and the masses. Through the use of a poignant narrative and subtle imagery, she has portrayed the plight of the soldiers and the toll war has on their minds as well as the landscape. The microcosmic representation of the garden makes the story not only applicable to the whole of Sri Lanka but also to other war-torn zones around the world. The author has talked about the role of memory, fragmentation, and silence, and how they interplay in developing trauma. Through a focus on language and terminology, the author critiques the rhetoric of war, examining how specific terms dehumanize individuals by reducing them to symbols in a larger ideological battle. The story portrays war as a cyclic force of destruction that affects both humans and the environment. It is a testament to the universality of trauma, transcending individual conflicts to serve as a broader commentary on the human condition. Through her narrative, Arasanayagam not only documents the horrors of the Sri Lankan Civil War but also creates a space for reflection, healing, and an urgent call for peace.

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